



Black Orpheus no. 10
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On the corrugated iron walls of shanties outside Lourenco Marques there are paintings of fowls, football players and butterflies; on the plaster walls of the Western Native township outside Johannesburg there are rising suns and circular blobs of earth color. They are part of a decorative folk art, spontaneous and anonymous, with no signature to identify them as the work of particular individuals.

The work of the musicians and writers of these and the other townships of Southern Africa have nothing to do with this folk art. Their is a struggle for singularity, an individual stamp, a personal synthesis of their own experience which is rooted deeply in an African past and at the same time exposed to the new contacts of a different cultural environment.

There are few visual artists engaged in this adventure; either they thrive on corny postcard traditionalism or they lose themselves head-over-heels in their object awe of Europeanisation. They are left with neither the universality of their own folk art nor with an identity of their own. They are the half-hearted by-products of culture contacts.

In itself the achievement of a personal identity is a difficult task. It is rendered even more so by the fact that there are virtually no facilities for the training of African painters, sculptors or architects in Southern Africa nor their practice. The painting of Valente Goenha Malangatana, a 24-year old artist who works in Lourenco Marques, the capital of Mocambique, are individual statements, which have little connection with decorative folk art. He has been working as a full time painter for less than two years, and has already produced a great deal of work which, like the work of those artists who have achieved a powerful identity through a strong personal vision, expresses Malangatana's own position with unusual artistic vigour and clarity.

Malangatana's background is an immensely important part of his work.

Luckily we need not guess at it. He has written down the story of his life and I reproduce here an abridged version of it. He writes.

"I was born in Marracuene, in the Regedoria Magaia, under Chief Diqua Magaia on the 6th June 1936, on Sunday morning.

According to what my mother says, I was always with her and always did with her the work she used to do, that is: going with her to the field, carrying water, going to the bush to cut wood for the cooking, picking mushrooms for lunch or dinner.

For these reasons I was almost like a girl...It was only when I started school and got used to my companions that I improved, but I was a cry-baby and very soft and did not know how to fight, and I was even nicknamed Malenga, or girl... My mother came from another part of the country to marry my father.

In her homeland, according to her and confirmed by me, because I remember having gone there with her when I was already able to see and remember what I saw, the girls were very keen on art work; even after they married they continued to do ornamental work, which is usually done with beads on calabashes, belts for women and men, wide necklaces for women and babies, and also bracelets made of beads for witchdoctors. My mother not only knew how to do this but also how to sharpen teeth...

Beside this she did tattooing on stomachs and faces. She used to make sewing thread from pineapple and sisal leaves.

I went to school in 1942 because my mother wished it, while my father was in South Africa working in the mines...At this school in the Swiss Mission I had a very good teacher. This teacher loved teaching and he also had a great gift for drawing, basket-making and other handwork...Here in this school I first saw pictures in books, but I did not believe they were drawings, and also saw some drawings done by the teacher's brother who had already finished studying at this school and was in the town...After I had passed from the first grade to the second and from the second to the third, this school was closed, unfortunately for us all because the teacher left.

Two years later, that is in 1947, I went to a Catholic school which I did not like so much as the other. I had no ability, but in spite of that I did not stop drawing on my own, chiefly on the sandy paths for want of paper. During this time at school, being together with several boys, I learnt to play some football and other games...

A bad period for me. My mother went completely mad while my father was on his way back from South Africa, arriving a few months later. It grieved me very much when she became like that. It happened one night when I and the children of another wife of my father's had been as usual to play some distance from our house where we lived far from everybody.

When we returned that evening as I came into the house where I slept with my mother, I heard a voice calling me. It was the voice of my half-brother, and my mother was also shouting: "My son, come to me for I am dying, your brother was killed because he was the cleverest in this house and was envied by this woman who used to call him 'white man,' pointing as she spoke to another wife of my father's...My aunt found a witchdoctor who took my mother in, and she stayed there having treatment for a long time...I was staying with my aunt and was attending the Catholic school...On religious holidays I used to decorate the house according to what I saw in the Church and she used to get very annoyed when I lit candles inside the house because she was afraid the house would

burn down. So I made a shack outside where I could do everything I liked, where I hung holy pictures and other photographs which I cut out of magazines and also some drawings I made of various religious images which I copied out of books and catechisms...at this time my mother returned to where she was married, and my father went away again without leaving anything for me. However, when we got to South Africa, he sent me two pairs of trousers — they were the same but were labelled, one for me and one for my half-brother...I then came to the city. When I arrived here, I worked as a children's servant alternating with going back home to teach in the Catholic school, when I earned only 40 escudos (ten shillings) per month, which to me was a lot. I helped my mother with the little I had, while she fed me.....

Returning to the city, I gave up teaching and went to work as a Coloured household where fortunately I was well-treated but, where, unfortunately, I had no time to go to school, although it was very near.....

In June 1953, I went to work at the Lourenco Marques Club, after a short rest at home, during which time I decided to go with the girl who would not leave my heart, Círcia Matias Machiana.

In the Lourenco Marques Club I started by working as a ball-boy and cook for the servants, and I began learning English...During this time I used to draw a lot when I saw many drawings done to decorate the rooms for dances.....

...And I studied, I went to a good night-school with a good teacher, so that my drawing improved and my pleasure in drawing increased...I was drawing in charcoal and painting in oils, and everyone who saw my work and ideas admired them and encouraged me...I painted furiously, rather forgetting to visit my parents and my wife...

A few months later, in October 1959, I was discovered painting at night by the architect Miranda Guedes. He admired my pictures and exchanged words with me...At this time too, this architect used to buy paintings from me to help me.

...Before the end of 1960 the architect told me that he would like to help and arranged for me to leave the Club and give up my contract at the end of January 1960, so I could work all the time ... He offered me a studio and monthly allowance, for which I and my family thank him from the bottom of our hearts.

In the studio I started receiving visits from students...Now and then I wrote poems, as I had already been doing before, and these, and this autobiography. I wrote in Portuguese — they have been translated by Mrs. Dorothy Guedes and Mrs. Philippa Rumsey.

I was always different from those who saw me wasting night after night drawing with a pencil trying to tell stories by sketching on the paper.

When I come to the town there were always people who attacked me for painting and drawing because in the view of many it was just playing about — indeed it was playing, but seriously, was always my reply to those who attacked me.

Since I do paint for pleasure nor as a profession but because I love art and poetry, apart from this poetry is art written on white paper without colour and in repeated letters but, poetry in a picture has life, smell and movement also...and I will even say that wherever I am, I shall be painting..."

Malangatana's background as so vividly described in his own writings, probably differs little from the life-patterns of many other young Africans. Were he only an interesting product of events and an accurate recorder of them, his work would already be of interest to students of Africa. This however, would hardly make of him an artist nor lift his work beyond the level of mere documentary.

What sets Malangatana aside is his ability to translate the happenings of his life into symbols which are artistically valid and which communicate to the widest audience. His paintings and poetry become powerful commentaries not only on particular happenings of his own life, but also on issues of universal importance — faith and love, jealousy, hate, mysticism and death.

Sometimes Malangatana forms these events into stories of possible and vaguely possible happenings, in From's sense myths — stories "which express, in symbolic language, religious and philosophical ideas experiences of the soul."

The painting the exposure of the evil one tells of the technique used to determine the guilty one by the administration of a potion to the suspects. They start talking deliriously and the guilty one sticks his tongue out. By agreement between chief, witchdoctors and community, the guilty one has his ear or finger cut off.

THE TREE OF FRIENDSHIP tells of jealousy and love between two women. In Malangatana's own words; "There were two women married to the same man and one night they became angry with each other. They hit each other and the one cut the leg of the other with a kitchen knife. The one who cut was the one who was most jealous. And the cut one, in spite of being wounded, said this to her friend: 'I am going away and I am taking my love with me to plant it another place.' The one who had cut, full of repentance went to get medicines but they were of no avail because the cut one was too sad. In that way they were separated. The plant is the plant of love." These story paintings are acted out in one picture. In THE LOVE STORY OF THE LETTER IN THE HAT Malangatana is not satisfied with compressing the time sequence into one statement, and he uses a quartet of paintings to explain the plot. The story has three major actors; the paintings contain two of them at a time in each of the paintings. One is always active, the other passive, and it is interesting to note how Malangatana paints each expressively to suit their roles. The wife in Picture 1 is the dutiful, peace-loving woman, carefully painted; in Pictures 2 and 3 she is a voluptuous nude with crude, flowing hair, freely painted; and finally in Picture 4 she has become a dematerialized body, a head floating on a vague whiteness. To counterpoint the goings-on, Malangatana uses a clock to tell the passing of time, a letter to develop the story and odd furniture to localise the events.

For many of his paintings Malangatana has no specific story in mind.

Often these are paintings of rituals involving witchcraft and violence, at other times of love and at times, less sublimely, even of an extraction in a dentist's

chair. In the ritual paintings like THE CASTING OF SPELLS, THE TEMPTATION OF THE CLERK and PRINCESA, few of the participators are identifiable — possibly a witchdoctor in green Machiavellian uniform or brightly clad tsotsi-boys from the city - and most are depicted as strangely universal figures. They might be African women, but they have long flowing hair; they might at other times be witchdoctors but they have Christian crosses on their necks. Malangatana seems to find no inherent contradiction in this. He seems able to avoid making those distinctions that exist so painfully between cultures and one senses in him the strong cross currents that must cause daily conflict to so many people. His paintings are for him the means of resolution, of showing not those things that commonly set people apart, but those that integrate and belong to all.

He probably does things quite unconsciously. It is much more likely that his major concern is the visual structure of the painting, and when he uses long flowing hair, it is partly due to his great natural preoccupation with hair ("Woman's hair shall be the blanket"), but largely due to his need to tie the painting together and free the heads from the bodies. In TWO FRIENDS not only the hair but the breasts ("Woman's breast shall be my pillow"), eyes ("Woman's eye shall open up for me the way to Heaven") and belly ("Woman's belly shall give birth to me up there") perform the same structural function. He uses nipples and navels as Kandinsky used points in ascendance. NUDE WITH CRUCIFIX belongs to this group of paintings. It is a glowing, orange-red picture with wet brush-strokes marking the sensuous contours of the levitated body. Again we see forms conspicuously reiterating themselves, notably the crucifix which is transposed into the cross of window mullions and powerfully positioned in the centre of the picture.

For me this work evokes strong religious associations; possibly not unnatural in the painting of a nude figure with a crucifix. But there is no vertical, thin, tensioned male body - instead Malangatana has painted a horizontal, nubile, compressed female nude. The head is pressed onto the body eliminating any neck, and at this point of maximum pressure, the crucifix springs and rests between the trinity of breast and breast-like stomach. It is a painting of classic simplicity, dignified, massive yet floating.

Works of this kind show Malangatana's combination of naivete and sophistication at their most striking: like the work of the naive painters, his paintings drive real power hovering between these two opposites.

Malangatana has his own brand of surrealism. It has little to do with the intellectual games of Western European surrealist painters. It is a plastic interpretation of a way of life in which mysticism and fantasy play a significant functional role.

Most of his works have this particular surreal flavour, but it is only in his latest paintings, of which THE SECRET VOYAGE is an excellent example, that Malangatana paints a true dream picture in which the individual elements are in themselves concrete and real, but which together for man make an impossible and fantastic situation. The earlier paintings are symbolic translations of the mysterious but actual events which occur inside and around the painter.

In his latest work Malangatana has taken the process to its logical end by giving these symbols a freer and more vital life in the completely surreal world of his painting. His work seems to be moving towards a greater liberty, and this development after only two years full-time work by a young man with virtually no formal training, is indeed remarkable.

If Malangatana has had a short career as a painter, he has hardly begun his work as a poet. As in his painting, he works inspirationally, often turning out reams of work in one session. Some of the poems like *Magaica* and the poems about the Coalbrook mine disaster, are descriptions of what are everyday events in the Portuguese African community where so many men leave home to work in South African mines. Other poems like *WOMAN* tend to be less descriptive than purely symbolic, and have close ties with many of the paintings.

Malangatana has recently had his first one-man exhibition. His work as presented here, a beginning, shows a rare intuitive artistic sensibility. Like few others in Southern Africa, he has used his work to come to terms with the dualities and conflicts of his position; and instead of these remaining as drawbacks, or him tossing away one thing for another on the advice of self-styled judges, he has embraced them all and turned them to profit. His task is to retain this vision while developing both as person and painter, and his position as a young artist in Africa is to be watched with the greatest interest. Already he is one of the few members of what promises to be an exciting new generation of African artists.



THE STORY OF THE LETTER IN THE HAT

"This is the story of two lovers. They used to correspond by means of the woman's husband's hat, as her lover was the husband's companion at work. The woman writes the letter and then puts it in the husband's hat before he leaves. The husband arrives at work and puts the hat on the hat-rack. The lover knowing which was the husband's hat, takes out the letter, reads it, answers, and puts it in the hat. After work, the husband goes back home and when he arrives, puts the hat on the hat-rack. The wife waits for some time, and when her husband is not around, takes the letter, answers it and puts her reply in the hat. This usually takes place between two and three in the morning, when the husband is dead with sleep. And the husband at seven o'clock delivers the letter to his wife's lover. This went on for a long time. But one day another man, who was jealous of the lover's good fortune, and who used to see the letters being taken and put back in the husband's hat, told him about it. So the husband instead of going straight to work the next day, waited in the next room to see what would happen. Sure enough, his suspicions were well founded. And when he went home, he was feeling very sorry for himself. So, he pretended to sleep and waited until three o'clock, by which time he knew his wife's letter would be written and placed in the hat. He then got up, and without his wife noticing anything, read the letter. He then felt even more sorry for himself, especially as he had himself been in the post office. He killed himself by taking a tin of D.D.T. He left a note saying 'Luisa: Good-bye forever!'"

